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Pull My Daisy. A Bebop Revolution

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On the 12th May 1959 *Pull My Daisy*, a film written and narrated by Jack Kerouac and directed by Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank, was first projected at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. Even though the film was enthusiastically acclaimed by critics like Jonas Mekas as one of the most accomplished productions of the New Cinema Group, as a “free improvisation” (Mekas, “New York Letter” 19) and as a fresh, lively sketch of Beat life, nonetheless some scholars¹ criticized the production. In particular, reviewers like Parker Tyler argued that it was a fake example of cinéma vérité, a feature made of artificial, staged spontaneity, and not the “accumulation rather than selection of images” (Robert Frank and Leslie Stevens qtd. in Mekas, “New York Letter” 19) that the two directors had claimed it to be. The semi-documentary style of the movie, shot in Leslie’s studio loft on 12th Street and 4th Avenue, in the Bowery heart of the Beat group, the naturalness of the actors involved, who in the case of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky played themselves, were considered by these critics as scams, trickeries which fooled the audience. The reason behind these accusations was that they hid the meticulous editing process through which the film was realized and masked the montage to the point of creating the illusion of true improvisation.

What the adverse reviewers did not realize, however, is that the kind of truthfulness intended by both the directors of *Pull My Daisy* and by Kerouac himself was utterly different from the one which distinguishes the journalistic approach, the naked camera lenses that record the events of an ordinary moment just as they happen. The form of improvisation that they struggled to realize, both on a structural and on a thematic level, was the one that characterized the performances of jazz players. Their ultimate goal was the filmic version of what Charlie Parker did as a soloist: an authentic, intimate, personal creation, which was released inside a pre-established, well-constructed melodic frame.² This specifically bebop style of improvisation is often achieved through a series

¹ Parker Tyler, for instance, defined the film as “fresh as a frozen pea” (Tyler, “For Shadows” 29). For a thorough description of the positive and negative reviews and articles that followed, see Floyd, “*Pull My Daisy*, The Critical Reaction” 22-23.

² Bebop’s revolution consisted in the constant renewal of the main melody realized through extended improvisation. Often borrowed from the repertoire of jazz ballads, as in Parker’s version of “Embraceable

of citations from an already-established, traditional standard, followed by an original reinterpretation of this harmonic framework, which leads the artist to a radically new succession of notes, a series of instinctive melodic and rhythmic inventions that are overlaid upon it (Owens 5-11).

Thus, in the case of these jazz musicians' interpretations, the presence of an ordered, precise, basic structure, either belonging to the summa of classic pieces or composed specifically for that session, does not work as a coercive element which oppose, ruin or mystifies the originality, the personal nature of each player's improvisation. On the contrary, the 'main theme' is the safe harbour, the secure territory from where the invention of new tunes, the exploration of different sonorities can be made. It is the rule that the musician needs to transgress; it is the series of chord structures on which the melody can travel freely and be constantly modified (Woideck 109-121).

If we analyze *Pull My Daisy* from a similar perspective, we will be able to fully grasp its 'bebop poetics', to understand it not simply as a "blended mix of improvisation and conscious planning" (Mekas, "Notes" 18) but rather as a free improvisation *stemming from* a steady basis of pre-arranged themes, plots and filmic structures. We will thus finally perceive the never-ending tension between the ordered, almost Cartesian structure of the written script and of the meticulous montage. At the same time, we will become aware of the instinctive, almost Dionysian nature, which can be seen in the spontaneous acting style of its protagonists, in the voice-off narration by Jack Kerouac, and in the improvisations that enrich the score realized by David Amram, who also wrote the music for the opening song of the movie, entitled "The Crazy Daisy".

By considering the relationship between the original text from which the film script was derived—the play *The Beat Generation* written in 1957— and the ad-libbed, almost-free flow of words which constitutes Kerouac's narrative voice in *Pull My Daisy*, we can realize how the attempt to reproduce the technique of jazz solo performances in the film was the most evident trope of Kerouac's own style in the whole production and its true revolution. It was the sign of the writer's attempt to realize also in the filmic medium the "sketching language" (Kerouac, "Essentials" 485),

You", the 'main theme' was 'deconstructed' and 'reinvented' by the soloist through highly complex, experimental harmonies and asymmetrically syncopated rhythms. The attention was clearly on the creative, inspired moment of the solo. For more information on the characteristics of Bebop see: Thomas, Owens, *Bebop: The Music and its Players* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Dave, Oliphant, ed, *The Bebop Revolution in Words and Music* (Austin, Tex.: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin, 1994); Ira, Gitler, *Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition of Jazz in the 1940's* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Francis, Davis, *Bebop and Nothingness: Jazz and Pop at the End of the Century* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996).

the “honest, confessional, spontaneous [...] blow (as per jazz musician)” (Kerouac, “Essentials” 484) advocated in his “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” (1953) and “Belief and Technique for Modern Prose” (1953).

On the one hand, in fact, Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank, started working on the project on the basis of an outline that Kerouac took from the third act of *The Beat Generation*, which fictionalised the 1955 meeting between a Swiss Bishop ordained by the Liberal Catholic Church and several members of the beat group in California, in the home of Neal and Carolyn Cassady (Kerouac, “Selected Letters” 72-73). However, just like a jazz standard, the initial outline was conceived as a sketch that could and should be manipulated both through the filming process and during the registration of Kerouac’s voice-off. This would have allowed the protagonists, and in particular Allen, Ginsberg, Orlovsky and Amram, (who also interpreted his own artistic role of horn player in the movie) to be “their delightful crazy anarchistic selves” (Alfred Leslie qtd. in Amram 49), and the story would then be transformed into a truthful representation of what Beat life was at that precise time of the year in New York City.

Through a radically new form of ‘spontaneous cinema’, Kerouac would have faithfully shown the true Beats, the original nature and depth of their artistic and interior quests in a moment when the American literary movement was already being associated with the dark, immature side of hipster life.³ In a similar way to what had happened with the birth of bebop, *Pull My Daisy* was provoking a cultural revolution through a stylistic one. Bebop had revealed how new harmonic creations were hidden in the structure of the traditional swing standards and the major players who were unveiling this secret⁴ were black musicians, trying to finally break the racial discrimination which still existed on the musical stage.

With *Pull My Daisy* Beat artists like Kerouac, Leslie and Frank were trying to produce a similar effect within the filmic field. They were showing how non-canonic intellectuals, outside the boundaries of the academic world, often produced the most innovative artistic creations. At the same time, they were creating a new form of cinema

³ I refer to the ‘youth revolution’ made of drug abuse and excessive sexual freedom that the press was describing and labelling as a “Beat phenomenon” and that Jack Kerouac himself had repudiated. In the late Sixties, when interviewed in the William F. Buckley Show, Kerouac declared: “The Beat Generation was a generation of beatitude, of pleasure in life, and tenderness. In the papers they called it “Beat Mutiny” and “Beat Insurrection”, words I never used, being a Catholic. I believe in order, tenderness and piety”.

⁴ The secret was “ the improvisation of spontaneous improvisation, rather than respecting the solos of the older age – you know” Charlie Parker interviewed by John McLellan, WHDH, Boston, on 13th June 1953, qtd. in Woideck 109-121.

by constantly rewriting and reinventing with ‘the poetics of improvisation’ a structured, pre-established script. This duality is revealed even in the soundtrack of the movie. Also the way in which the narrated off-voice was realized perfectly shows how Kerouac used the third act of *The Beat Generation* as the basis to compose something “wild, pure, coming in from under” (Kerouac, “Belief” 483) and an “uninterrupted and unrevised full confession about what actually happened in real life” (Kerouac, “Belief” 483).

When Jack recorded the movie soundtrack in Newman’s studio, in fact, he improvised the whole narration. He commented all the images appearing on screen with rhythmic, syncopated sentences, using “breath as measure” (Kerouac qtd. in Moody 116) like a jazz player, and he completely reshaped the frame of his original play, avoiding some dialogues, manipulating some others and even adding several details. For instance, Kerouac exploited the initial scenes of the film, which were not present in the script outline, as a poetic introduction to the rest of the story. He used the filmed discussion between Allen and Corso to communicate the beats’ speculations on the possibility to express through poetry every contemporary reality, including the apparently sterile nature of the New York skyscrapers.

The most astonishing transgression and improvement of the original text, however, were represented by the writer’s linguistic plays, by his onomatopoeic vocabulary and the rap-like quality of the most surrealist, experimental passages of the narration. One of the most interesting examples of this ‘lexical revolution’ is when the camera slowly pans around the kitchen where the beats have gathered and Kerouac’s voice starts describing the bugs that are slowly invading the apartment: “cockroaches, cockroaches, coffee cockroaches, stove cockroaches, city cockroaches, peanut butter cockroaches, cockroach, cockroach” (Kerouac, “Pull My Daisy” 32). The strong, distinct consonant sound of the term cockroach became a way to musically contradict the smooth camera movements, to interrupt the fluidity of the pan with a highly dramatic use of language. This unexpected verbal improvisation, which willingly unbalanced the visual linearity of the sequence, illustrates how Kerouac used the narration as a way to actively manipulate the story narrated by the images, and to eventually become the *deus ex machina* of the movie.

With his narrative, authorial voice, in fact, the writer both reinvented the plot sketched in the third act of *The Beat Generation* and used this new, manipulated version as a tool to originally intervene in the film diegesis, to rewrite it through a series of comments that could either emphasize or destabilize the main story-line. It does not

seem strange, then, that David Amram, remembering the day in which the narration was recorded, compares Kerouac's risky, but also masterly improvisation to the "challenges of Charlie Parker, soloing with his string orchestra at Birdland. His words were like a jazz solo, soaring above and weaving through the structure of the film" (Amram 75). Just like the jazz saxophonist, the writer was transforming some standard material into a refined form of artistic creation, into an original invention, during an immediate 'narrative jam session' in front of his friends.

Kerouac was so desirous of maintaining the spontaneous nature of his ad-libbed narration that he initially intended to stick to his very first take, by claiming that he believed "in the sanctity and purity of natural thoughts freely flowing," in the "genie of spontaneity" (Amram 78) who was also the sacred god of the jazz music he liked. In addition, Kerouac wanted his improvisation to be the last one to manipulate the structure of the movie because he wished to be left the final authorial signature. He liked the idea of having the decisive, ultimate creative power on a piece of art that, for the first time in his life, was not primarily his own. However, he had to recognize, like any jazz solo star, that through another rehearsal he could have also risked to ameliorate his performance, to strengthen his command and to achieve highest levels of virtuosity. Thus, Kerouac accepted to record some other takes of his voice-off track and the final narration was realized by mixing a choice of two different versions, which both fitted the film "in an uncanny way" (Amram 78). Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank, in the end, were granted the privilege of the last authorial word by editing the definitive soundtrack.

However, a key section of the soundtrack was realized without direct intervention from the two film directors and was partially conceived as a 'duet' between a contemporary horn player and music composer and a talented New York writer in love with jazz. The improvised sections of the score realized by David Amram were created in parallel and in synchrony with Kerouac's ad-libbed words. The musician sat at the piano while Kerouac was recording his narration and, by following the inflections of Jack's voice, he created the melodies that accompany several key moments of the movie. Kerouac's sudden changes of rhythm became the background sonorities, the 'main frame' on which Amram's interpretation was realized, and the writer's free flowing comments worked as the poetic imagery which empowered the composer's inspiration. Even though the rest of the music was subsequently written by Amram and recorded with a group of nine people after this improvised session, nonetheless in his

autobiography the composer stresses the importance of this moment of shared creativity with Jack Kerouac in giving him hints for the whole *Pull My Daisy* score.

Another factor that contributed to the perfect match between the improvised music pieces and Kerouac's own narration was the familiarity that Amram and Kerouac had acquired on stage by performing jazz-poetry together. Their steady collaboration started in the Spring of 1957, when they realized the first mixed show made of verses, piano music, bongos and scat-singing in front of the excited audience of the Café Figaro in New York City. Their ability to feel each other's rhythm and to create together a harmonious vibe made of poetic words and music, of improvised gestures and sounds contributed to the naturalness of the film score, which highlighted the key passages of the story without being intrusive or overwhelming the rhythm of Kerouac's narrative voice. Moreover, the original soundtracks—being based on a mixture between improvisational and precomposed pieces—contributed to mirror and reinforce the 'jazz poetics' which distinguished the entire film since the beginning of its shooting.

In fact, if we consider the whole filming process, we realize that the constant dialectics between the structure established in the written script and the instinctive acting of its beat characters—the stage directions and their anarchic, histrionic reinterpretations of the outline—had characterized even the first week of filming. The vast majority of the out-takes realized in Leslie's loft during these first days of work are a series of inhibited vignettes, where metaphysical discussions on poetry suddenly leave the place to relentless jumps, disordered dances and chaotic movements. This Bosh-like, surrealist universe—which went lost when the complete film reels were destroyed in a disastrous fire⁵—is summed up in the final version in a single sequence, when Ginsberg impersonates Apollinaire collapsing in front of Balzac's grave. During the initial stage of shooting the potentialities of free acting were thus apparently transforming the project into a hellish, uncontrollable confusion. The possibility of giving birth to an innovative 'filmic solo' seemed to be spoilt by the excessive behaviour of Allen and Corso, which kept producing messy ridiculous situations, as when they started eating and throwing French fries to each other in the middle of a conversation on beat verses and avoided rhymes.

At this primal stage of their creation, Leslie and Frank seemed to be far from realizing the visual version of bebop improvisations. They rather appeared on the verge of

⁵ The fire severely damaged one of Alfred Leslie's studios, where the complete version of the movie, including all the take-outs, was stored.

creating the prologue of a true, chaotic failure, of an unbearable ‘filmic cacophony’. However, when Jack Kerouac, faced with the delirium that was dominating the set during those moments, expressed his stupor and disappointment, the two directors told him to have faith in the ‘magic of montage’ and that everything “will have been fixed” (Amram 76) while editing, when the salient scenes would have been chosen and mixed with the score and the writer’s voice. This initial shooting phase was similar to the first rehearsal of a jazz group, when the steady musical frames, the ‘main themes’, have not yet been adapted to the style embodied by the single interpreters and thus also the improvisatory moments stemming from them are consequently less developed. The performance must be frequently interrupted, segmented and reworked, and the overall impression of an external listener might be confusion and bewilderment.

Leslie and Frank knew that the most crucial stage would have been the montage because in that specific moment the visible stitches between the previously arranged structure and the free improvisation, the authentic, individual interpretations would have disappeared. When the editing process had been accomplished, everything in the movie, from its soundtrack to its visual texture would have suddenly appeared as a single flow of spontaneous creation. Like in Charlie Parker’s performances, the original plain vocabulary of a standard harmonic structure would have been transformed into a new, original formula through a liquid succession of notes and gestures; a pre-established, traditional frame would have been metamorphosized into a rebellious, energetic expression without breaks, without sharp cuts, thanks to the poetics of improvisation.

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